Burma's Ethnic Minority Issue: No Easy Solution

The release of Aung San Suu Kyi in Burma/Myanmar has raised the questions of how the ethnic minorities of the country will be treated under democratic rule and where the leaders of the democracy movement stand on the controversial subject of opium production and heroin distribution.

(PRWEB) June 30, 2002 -- Finally released from 19-months of house arrest in May, Aung San Suu Kyi has given little away as to the content of the talks she had with the military negotiators prior to her release. With Burma's (Myanmar) future hanging in the balance, the Nobel peace laureate's record on fighting for democracy and her advocacy of human rights within the country are evident for the entire world to see. However, her position on the ethnic minority people's issue and the controversial question of how to deal with the flood of opium, heroin and meta-amphetamines from the country is less clear.

Some Burmese political scientists opine that even Suu Kyi may continue the policies implemented by the military to suppress the rights of ethnic minorities. Estates Hideyuki Takano, the author of the soon to be released book "The Shore Beyond Good and Evil: A Report from Inside Burma's Opium Kingdom." Takano's book takes us in behind the Poppy Curtain, into the land of the Wa people, a minority group led by Pao Yuchang and the United Wa State Army (UWSA). This group has recently branded as the largest opium (the raw material for heroin) producer in the world by the US State Department.

Any future government in Burma (Myanmar) will have to at the very least come to terms with the vast, half-million strong military that has ruled the country with an iron grip since General Ne Win's 1962 coup. The course of this relationship will also dictate the course of the nation's future.

Aung San Suu Kyi's father, the national hero General Aung San himself, negotiated the Panglong agreement in 1947, which recognized many of the minority groups rights and opened the door to independence for these groups. Sadly he was assassinated before he could implement the agreement and the ineffectual democratic leaders that came after him presided over a period of turmoil during which the military felt too much was being given up to these minority groups. Fearing disintegration and chaos the military took over and 40 years of oppression followed.

The minority issue has always been a very sensitive and complex one with the military government. "With around 135 ethnic groups officially listed by the government alone, The ethnic conflict plaguing past and present Yugoslavia promises to recur in Burma." points out Takano. The military government in 2000 renegotiated a cease-fire with the Wa and some other opium producing guerrilla groups, which had been in effect since 1989. They also arranged for the surrender and subsequent collaboration with the leading drug lord Khun Sa and his large Mong Tai Army in 1996. According to Takano, the military has tacitly approved of and increased their involvement in the narcotics trade run by these groups over the years.

All this means that the policies and approach adopted by Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) to deal with these complex challenges will undoubtedly shape any agreement reached between the parties in the future. The shape of the final agreement could also herald a new period of turmoil and another round of hardships for the people of this conflict torn country. Takano concludes, "Presently, Burma sits on a pressure cooker. As the pressure increases, the lid will explode."
The Shore Beyond Good and Evil: A Report from Inside Burma's Opium Kingdom, by Hideyuki Takano is published by Kotan Publishing, 277pp, Hardcover, $23.95

ADDITIONAL SIDEBAR

Burma & Minority Group Chronology

Jan 1947 - Britain agrees to grant independence in negotiations with the nationalist leader, General Aung San.

Feb 1947 - Ethnic groups sign the Panglong Agreement, which guarantees a level of autonomy, rights and the prospect of future independence to Kachin, Shan, and Chin ethnic areas.

July 1947 - General Aung San assassinated

Sept 1947 - New constitution is approved. Shan and Karenni groups are granted the right to secede from the Union of Burma after a ten-year period following the declaration of independence. Karen and other groups are given no right to secede.

1948 - Independence from Britain and government formed by Prime Minister U Nu.
- Karen launch liberation struggle.

1958 - Shan liberation movement launches struggle.

Mar 1962 - Military coup led by General Ne Win ushers in 40 years of oppressive isolationist rule.

1964 - One party socialist state created.

1974 - Government agrees to crack down on the illegal drug trade.
- Government declares martial law.

1976 - Ethnic liberation groups control over one third of the country.

1988 - Pro-democracy demonstrations crushed by the military.
- National League of Democracy (NLD) formed by General Aung San’s daughter, Aung San Suu Kyi, and others.
- Ethnic liberation movements come together to establish the Democratic Alliance of Burma.
- Martial law declared again.
- U.N. and Western countries halt bilateral aid.

1989 - Aung San Suu Kyi and other NLD leaders placed under house arrest.
- Military increases pressure on ethnic rebel groups.
- Cease-fire concluded with United Wa State Army, a large ethnic military force and leading drug producers.

1990 - NLD wins a landslide victory in election. NLD leaders again arrested.
1991 - Aung San Suu Kyi is awarded Noble Peace Prize.

1995 - Aung San Suu Kyi is released from house arrest.

1996 - Khun Sa, top drug lord and leader of the large ethnic Mong Tai Army (MTA) surrenders to the Burmese military and is offered government protection.

1997 - Burma / Myanmar accepted into the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) - U.S. tightens economic sanctions.

2000 - Cease-fire with United Wa State Army (UWSA) renewed. - Aung San Suu Kyi placed under house arrest again.

2001 - Burma / Myanmar becomes world’s top producer of opium. - Negotiations begin between the Burma/Myanmar military regime and Aung San Suu Kyi

May 6, 2002 - Aung San Suu Kyi is released from house arrest.

June 2002 – Upsurge in fighting and tension along the Burma/Thailand border involving the United Wa State Army (UWSA) and Burma’s military forces against ethnic Shan forces.

Information taken from The Shore Beyond Good and Evil: A Report from Inside Burma’s Opium Kingdom by Hideyuki Takano, Kotan Publishing.

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